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Should Press Guard U. S. Secrets?

SPEAKING before newspaper publishers in New York last week, President Kennedy urged the adoption of voluntary censorship by the American press as a means of aiding the national security.

Some administration officials (but not Kennedy himself) have been so anxious to find a scapegoat for the ill-fated Cuban invasion that they are now blaming newspapers for reporting invasion preparations.

There was, of course, nothing contrary to American security in reporting on the training of Cuban refugees in Guatemala. Certainly Castro, with his network of Communist spies, knew about it. What was dangerous to the United States was the reporting that the Central Intelligence Agency was directing the effort and that Americans were providing the professional military direction. This was harmful to American interests if the United States proposed to deny any participation in the eventual evasion.

BUT SHORT of the type of "official-voluntary" censorship which prevailed during World War II, we do not believe any program for withholding this type of information is feasible. American newspaper editors desire to serve their country in the best way possible; but there is no way to determine when a secret should be withheld in the national interest. Officials always try to hide their mistakes, for example, and newsmen just as regularly try to ferret them out.

Unless there is a security agency manned by experts in whom newsmen have confidence, there can be no general agreement on what should be withheld and what should be printed. This gives a competitive advantage to the newsman who concludes, perhaps sincerely or perhaps selfishly, that the national security is not involved.

FURTHERMORE, we question whether any operation which cannot

be kept secret from newsmen can be kept secret from the Communists. The Communist espionage organization is first-rate and, in the case of the Cuban invasion, probably knew a "good" deal more about the operation than American newsmen. The Communists gained a propaganda, not a military, advantage from reporting of the preparations in the American press. Red propaganda was not limited to saying, "We accuse the U. S. of participating in this invasion." Communist organs could declare: "U. S. publications admit American participation."

But, while the American newspapers will explore any means of cooperating with government officials on such matters, we fear there is no solution short of the wartime type of censorship. And the non-cooperators and irresponsible segments of the communications industry would wreck even such a program unless conditions approximating wartime crisis exist.